

## **Buried Voices and Distant Songs**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

As long as I can remember, I've always been in love with the stage. As a child when I was asked what I wanted to become when I grew up, I always answered, "Be a clown." After a good laugh, my well-intentioned elders would gently advise me that I couldn't really become a clown for a living. With this, my instinctual second response immediately was to become a teacher . . . and a clown. Though professional clowning has not made it onto my list of abilities, I was not far from the realities of what the future would have in store for me. By my late teens, I had confidently clarified my career goals. I would work as a professional actress and a theatre arts educator to inner-city youth such as myself. I wanted to ensure that future generations would have the opportunities that a quality arts education would provide without regard to their racial, economic, or social backgrounds.

I am now living my dream. I am a professional actress and theatre arts educator to inner-city youth in Houston, TX. With this, I have found that students respond more positively to learning theatre arts once they learn that I am a professional actress. My profession provides my students with the unique opportunity to learn first-hand accounts of experiences from "life in the professional theatre." I cannot express the joy I feel when after a performance I look out onto an audience and see the bright, elated faces of my students! This is surely what my dreams were guiding me towards: the reality that true learning comes through observation and that I can best teach art by simply doing the art that I teach.

I am a firm believer in the power and majesty of an artist who has a clearly defined purpose and mission. My ultimate goal as an arts educator is to guide young artists on a path of intelligent investigation and research. I want their artistry to be the result of intellectual thoughts and conscious actions. Accomplishing this requires a constant source of creative inspiration to keep my students motivated and on task. The statistics of my classroom environment are overwhelming. I teach seventh and eighth grade inner-city, low-income students who face a multitude of daily challenges in their personal lives; forcing education to take the often-times neglected back seat to daily survival needs. Ninety-five percent of my students are labeled "at-risk," thirty percent are "special education," and most are being raised by their grandparents and/or other caregivers, not their birth parents. Though these characteristics are shocking, to teachers who teach in the challenging inner-city classroom, it is simply a minor description of the major daily realities we are challenged with.

Teaching theatre arts to my students arms them with the necessary tools to compete in our ever-changing global society. Several intelligences are addressed consistently throughout the course such as bodily/kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and verbal/linguistic skills. Theatre arts allow my students to explore their experiences and environment from different perspectives. At the same time they are challenged to expand their perceptions of the world to include probable experiences and environments they are neither personally familiar nor comfortable with. As the course progresses, my students have a more positive self-image and increased self-esteem.

Through my years of writing and producing productions for young people, I have discovered an uneasy, strong reluctance on the part of most African American students to the discussion and study of slavery in America. Some will honestly admit that they do not want to discuss or learn about African American slavery or past because their parents do not want to do so. So, why should they? It is my hope that by creatively merging the study of African American slave culture and past into the study of theatre arts, my students will gain a newfound respect for themselves and their own ancestral past.

## **UNIT BACKGROUND**

Given the long history of the poor academic performance of African American students one might ask why almost no literature exists to address their specific educational needs. One reason is a stubborn refusal in American education to recognize African Americans as a distinct cultural group. While it is recognized that African Americans make up a distinct *racial* group, the acknowledgement that this racial group has a distinct *culture* is still not recognized. It is presumed that African American children are exactly like white children but just need a little extra help. Rarely investigated are the possibilities of distinct cultural characteristics (requiring some specific attention) or the detrimental impact of systematic racism. Thus the reasons for academic failure continue to be seen as wholly environmental and social. Poverty and lack of opportunity often are presented as the only plausible reasons for poor performance. And the kinds of interventions and remedies proposed to compensate for these deficiencies. (Ladson-Billings 9)

I have entitled this curriculum unit “Buried Voices and Distant Songs” for several reasons. Firstly, I chose “Buried Voices” to serve as a visual narrative of people being buried alive in an attempt to deaden the essential messages they are communicating. Secondly, “Distant Songs” is a reminder of the traveler/newcomer perspective, which is so essential to this curriculum. Thirdly, I am consciously using the present tense because I want my students to imagine that these spirits are *still* communicating vast amounts of knowledge and remarkable stories yet to be heard and comprehended. Designed as an answer to the serious calls for culturally relevant lessons which actively engage both the teacher and the learner, “Buried Voices and Distant Songs” is certain to motivate, stimulate, and encourage insightful thoughts, continued research, and intelligent

conversation. Supported by the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) for theatre arts grade 7, this six-week long unit is an intensive study of African American slavery integrated into the theatre arts curriculum.

117.37

(a) Introduction.

(1) Four basic strands—perception creative expression/performance, historical and cultural heritage, and critical evaluation—provide broad, unifying structures for organizing knowledge and skills students are expected to acquire. Through perceptual studies, students increase their understanding of self and others and develop clear ideas about the world. Through a variety of theatrical experiences, students communicate in a dramatic form, make artistic choices, solve problems, build positive self-concepts, and relate interpersonally.

(2) Students increase their understanding of heritage and traditions through historical and cultural studies in theatre. Student response and evaluation promote thinking and further discriminating judgment, developing students who are appreciative and evaluative customers of live theatre, film, television, and other technologies. (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills)

To localize our research and add a sense of ownership to the course, I intend to focus on the archeological and research findings of the Levi Jordan Plantation Quarters, Brazoria County, Texas. Located approximately 60 miles south of Houston, the sugar mill on the Levi Jordan Plantation became the largest antebellum mill constructed in Texas. This plantation was in complete operation (occupied with slave and tenant labor thereafter) for approximately 38 years from 1848 to 1886. I am strategically concentrating our studies on the findings of the Levi Jordan Plantation under the generalized assumption that many of my students may have descended from this plantation.

A deliberate attempt is made here, however, to distinguish between two aspects of culture, between what are termed *value culture* and *reality culture*. The former, as applied to slave life, refers to customs, beliefs, and values presumably influenced by an African heritage. The latter includes those aspects of slave life largely influenced instead by external forces, especially social controls inherent within slave society. (Singleton 142)

“Buried Voices and Distant Songs” will focus on the complex culture of slavery. Webster’s Dictionary defines culture as “the development of a given race or a nation at a given time; its customs, its arts, its conveniences, etc.” With this definition as a guide for our studies, students will study the development of African American culture as a result of slavery in America. Simply put, my students will explore the creolization process of the African into this new, strange, and hostile land of America based on the artifacts excavated from The Conjuror’s Cabin on the Levi Jordan Plantation.

Ultimately, archeologists are seeking answers to general questions about African American life. How, for example, was an African heritage transplanted, replaced, or reinterpreted in America? In what ways are the artifacts recovered from African American sites reflections of ethnic patterns or of social conditions such as poverty and the unequal access the material goods? How did African Americans survive the rigors of everyday life? (Singleton 141)

Dr. Kenneth Brown, nationally recognized archeologist and professor of archeology at The University of Houston in Houston, TX, has spent over fifteen years overseeing the excavation of the Levi Jordan Plantation. Through his efforts, literally hundreds of artifacts have been excavated from the slave quarters on this plantation. The items range in scope from pieces of flatware, kitchen utensils, ceramics, clothing, and buttons to munitions, coins, and intricately carved bone. These artifacts reveal the importance of the creolization process as a necessary tool for the survival of the enslaved community.

Our studies will center on the widely held thought that African slaves retained very little to none of their African culture once brought to America. These beliefs are partly based on the fact that the nature of American slavery literally worked at stripping African slaves of their natural identity as a means of making them more submissive. Though on the surface it looks as if slaves did fully submerge themselves into the European culture of America, “Buried Voices and Distant Songs” will prove that the African slaves are perfect examples of the creolization process; the merging of two separate and distinct cultures. Although the creolization of African slaves into the American European culture was purely based on basic survival instincts, it shows a high degree of systematic thought processes and a self-knowledge that is not often credited to the African slaves.

The notion of “cultural relevance” moves beyond language to include other aspects of student and school culture. Thus culturally relevant teaching uses student culture in order to maintain it and to transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture. The negative effects are brought about, for example, by not seeing one’s history, culture, or background represented in the textbook or curriculum or by seeing history, culture, or background distorted. (Ladson-Billings 17)

As a result of both intentional and unintentional motives, education has done a severe disservice to the research and study of slavery in America. Students have been misguided in the realities of America slavery (and still continue to be). Theories such as slaves being monolithic, having no remembrance of their native homeland and cultures and being docile and obedient servants remain pervasive in education. Additionally, theories on the oppressor (slave owner) are also misguided in education. Some of which are that all slave owners conducted their plantations in the same manner; that all were hostile to their slaves; or, that they did not allow slaves certain “privileges” such as marriage. In an effort to teach the subject of slavery with honesty and dignity, “Buried

Voices and Distant Songs” will delicately and deliberately combine archeological discoveries on the cultures of both American slave owners and the enslaved, a study of African cultures (primarily those that are evidenced through the archeological findings of African American slaves), oral histories and artifacts with the disciplined study of the creative art form of acting.

Art means two things: (1) creative works and the process of producing them, and (2) the whole body of work in the art forms that make up the entire human intellectual and cultural heritage. When we study art, we involve ourselves in a particular set of processes, products, influences and meanings. We recognize that art is expressed in various styles, reflects different historical circumstances, and draws on a multitude of social and cultural resources. (ArtsEdge National Standards)

Theatre is life. The primary responsibility of every theatre artisan is responsibly to hold a prism to the most compelling of life’s stories and discover truth. These truths will breathe new life and energy into audiences, encouraging reflection and contemplation. This emotional uplifting and change—catharsis—is the beauty and mystery of art.

With this objective in sight, it is imperative that my students have a fearless thirst for truth. They must search for the truth in themselves, which mirrors or reflects those of a given character. “Buried Voices and Distant Songs” will challenge their thirst for truths from varied perspectives. Theatrically, I will incorporate this search for truth into the study of various acting and performance styles. Pantomime is a fundamental acting style, which uses no sound or speech, focusing mainly on the weight and size of imaginary objects. The challenge is for the actor to remain concentrated so that the audience will perceive the story and/or message that are being related. Students will use the culture of American slavery as the foundation for studying this performance style. With this, one student might pantomime a blacksmith at work while another might re-enact a field hand or house servant. The choices are limitless for my young performers.

In addition, “Buried Voices and Distant Songs” will enhance the theatre arts curriculum by creating definite and clear parallels between core subject areas and the fine arts. Unfortunately, for many persons not actively engaged in arts activities, these parallels aren’t always clear. This unique curriculum unit will also give my students the unique opportunity to consciously merge several core subject areas into one creative art form—theatre! The sub-topics for several curriculum units will easily cross over to other academic areas such as English, History, Literature, and Video. The research provided through the study of “Buried Voices and Distant Songs” will also serve as inspiration and motivation for the creation of original scripts and short plays. In doing so, students will be given a consistent theme on which to learn, discuss, reflect, and create.

## AMERICAN SLAVERY

The definition of slavery is free labor, meaning that there is no compensation given for the mandatory and forced provision of services. It is purely motivated by the need to have a product produced quickly and more efficiently with as little or no effort on the part of the producer as possible. Slavery is an economically based system. For the American frontiersmen, it was an extremely cost-effective way to solve the problem of how to develop their new and intimidating land. This being said, slavery is in no means only relative to American history. Slavery was practiced throughout the world before its practice in America began, including Africa. Yet, it was in no way practiced to the grueling, inhumane, degrading, and horrific standards that America became known for.

People have asked why Africans themselves engaged in the slave trade. Given the function of slavery in African societies, the origin of their participation is not too difficult to understand. First and foremost, slavery was not confused with the notions of superiority and inferiority invoked as justification for black slavery in America. On the contrary, it was not at all uncommon for African owners to adopt slave children or to marry slave women, who then became full members of the family. Slaves of talent accumulated property and in some instances reached the status of kings; Jaja of Opobo (in Nigeria) is a case in point (Smythe x).

American slavery surpassed its initial purpose of providing free labor by creating a system which systematically dehumanized individuals. In an effort to force slaves into continued submission, they were denied their native languages, family, customs, rituals and religions. In contrast to the practices of slavery in other countries including England and France, from which most of the American slave owners descended, American slavery soon came to be defined by race alone based on the resiliency of the African slave versus the European indentured servant in forced, harsh, and highly inhumane working conditions. To support their practice of “investing” in a reliable and steady work force, white slave owners soon began justifying their enslavement practices solely on the basis that Africans (Blacks) were a highly inferior and uncivilized people in need of European reform. With this, religion soon came to be used as a primary tool to encourage and justify the enslavement of African peoples in America. Africans were considered pagan and uncivilized because they were not Christians. In the minds of slave owners, enslaving them and forcing Christianity upon them was a good deed. It taught them the importance of submission to “a master” and brought them further away from their authentic African cultures. “Buried Voices and Distant Songs” will provide evidence that teaching Christianity to African slaves was indeed a welcome relief to many of the enslaved African community because it actually brought them *closer* to their African spiritual roots, practices, and religions.

## **A STORY WITH TWO BEGINNINGS**

### **Beginning One: West Africa, circa 1800**

A land of beauty and grace all its own. Our characters are the people, the land itself, and the wealth and knowledge it produces. The people are not one, but many cultures, languages, beliefs and traditions. These varied and many cultures are united by several common threads, one of which is the land. West Africa supports itself with an abundance of crops. Fresh fruits and vegetables grow from this hardy terrain freely despite the apparent challenge of high temperatures and constant full sun exposure. The rice fields in Africa are pure artistry. For decades, African farmers have skillfully manipulated the land to produce a crop that, for all intent purposes, should not be able to grow here and yet it does, and thrives.

The people of West Africa are many different cultures with as many different languages. For the purposes of our lesson, I will focus on a few commonly shared beliefs and practices. One of which is the practice of the village conjurer. Today more commonly referred to as a “root man/woman,” the village conjurer was nothing short of the miracle worker in human form. The conjurer was a healer, a doctor. He healed physical pains with a high knowledge of herbal remedies developed and handed down for generations. He was also the village midwife, responsible for guiding all the births in the village. This healer not only cured physical pains, but emotional ones as well. Villagers sought the guidance of the conjurer when they needed the help of ancestral spirits in their daily human affairs. Possibly they had an enemy whom they needed protection from or they were seeking guidance for a difficult dilemma. Whatever the situation, with a simple offering of appreciation given to the conjurer, one could be confident that his concerns were in good and able hands.

A major tool of the conjurer was the cosmogram. The cosmogram is a symbol for the cycle of life as well as a curing symbol most commonly associated with the BiKongo peoples of West Africa. The cosmogram is constructed of four points representing the four major directions—north, south, east, and west. Each direction holds a power and responsibility all its own. The northern point of the cosmogram represents the height of one’s power in this world—male traits. The southern point represents the height of one’s power in the spirit world—female traits. The eastern point of the cosmogram represents the maintenance of life in this world. The western point represents the transition from life in this world to life in the next—dying, death.

### **Beginning Two: Brazoria County, Texas—America, 1848**

This is where our story with two beginnings merges—West Africa and Brazoria County, Texas—America. Levi Jordan was an avid supporter of the American slave trade. He often prided himself on the number of slaves that he owned and was even noted once for

bragging that he owned a slave for every day of the year on his plantations. A businessman whose mission was to leave a legacy that would last well after his years on earth, Jordan was motivated by financial greed and the intense desire for power and control. In 1848, he purchased 2,221 acres of land in Brazoria County, Texas for \$8,884.00, along with his son-in-law James McNeil. Only one in a string of Jordan's plantations that spread across the South (South Carolina, Alabama, Louisiana, and Arkansas), this new plantation would focus on the production of sugar and cotton.

Quickly regarded as the "Levi Jordan Plantation," the main house and the sugar mill were complete with a slave workforce of approximately 100 African slaves by 1854. The Levi Jordan Plantation was a gang labor plantation. Without a doubt, the worse type of plantation to be had was one organized through the use of gang labor tactics. In sharp contrast to the task labor system of slavery, where slaves were assigned responsibilities to be completed under the oftentimes relaxed supervision of slave owners, the gang system employed a small number of slaves working under the intense supervision of a hostile overseer under severely harsh and inhumane conditions for six long days a week. Several gangs worked different areas of the plantation throughout the day. When it was time for the actual processing of sugar, the gangs worked even longer and more grueling shifts.

For slaves, the gang labor system was the harshest to work under not only because of the physical punishments, but for the mental and emotional ones as well. The gang labor system made it close to impossible for slaves to have communications between one another. This forced lack of communication made it seemingly impossible to retain any sense of an African community or culture amongst the enslaved. They were watched so closely and consistently, that it was close to impossible to do anything that was not approved of by Levi Jordan, plantation owner.

The cruelty of Levi Jordan spread to the treatment of his own family also. Upon his death in 1872, the Levi Jordan Plantation (2221 acres) was divided amongst his three surviving grandsons. His wife, Ann, and daughter, Emily, were permitted to remain living on the plantation and profit from it while they were alive, but were not given any land inheritance. His granddaughter, Ann, married Robert Martin, whom Jordan disliked with a great vengeance. This being so, he expressly left nothing for Anne, her husband, nor her four male children, from his estate. He also stipulated that his wife, Sarah, was to never allow Ann, or her sons, onto the property. Levi's plans went astray when Ann died shortly after he did while giving birth to a fourth son in 1873. To ensure that biological family would raise her surviving children, the children began to spend a great deal of time on the Levi Jordan Plantation under the care of Sarah Jordan.

The web of Levi Jordan's control continued to unravel in 1879 with the death of his grandson William McNeil. Having not married and with no legally recognized children, his land inheritance of the northern half of the plantation went under the ownership of Sarah Jordan. When Sarah Jordan passed away in 1882, her daughter Emily Jordan McNeil inherited full ownership of the northern half of the plantation—all 1111 acres!



Completely disregarding the wishes of Levi Jordan, Emily sold the entire property to the Martin boys for \$10.00, without notifying her sons, James and Philip, who were managing the property. The McNeil Boys continued to oversee the property until 1886, when one of the Martin Boys, Royal Martin reached the age of twenty-one.

The height of this family drama is just beginning. The Martin Boys immediately brought a level of cruelty to the African American community on the plantation that surprisingly surpassed that of Jordan or the McNeil Boys. Court records show that in 1887, Royal and his brother McWillie were charged with one count of first degree murder and three counts of assault with intent to murder. All of the plaintiffs were African American and resided in the community on the Levi Jordan Plantation. With this evidence, it is safe for one to assume that the victims of the Martin Boy's violent attacks were members of the African American tenant community.

Archeologist Dr. Kenneth Brown strongly asserts that the violent criminal acts of the Martin Boys and their extremely racist views caused the sudden abandonment of the African American community from the Levi Jordan Plantation. Certainly they were no longer reasonably safe nor welcome on the plantation any longer. Further court records suggest that the Martin Boys had intentions for the plantation to be changed into breeding and training grounds for racehorses. This would have immediately removed the necessity for the large number of African American tenant laborers who were currently residing on the plantation.

### **Buried Voices Speak**

Under the direction of archeologist Dr. Kenneth Brown, the Levi Jordan Plantation was excavated with great care and precision. Having already headed the excavation of the Frogmore Manor Plantation on St. Helena Island, Beaufort County, South Carolina, Dr. Brown is a scholar on the sensitivity and depth of research necessary to honorably conclude the findings of African American Historical Sites. Too often the conclusions drawn from the artifacts excavated from these sites are not accurate with respect to the African past of the African American slaves. In contrast, Dr. Brown's conclusions are proof that African American slaves did not leave their African cultures behind them entirely through their forced submersion into American culture. Instead, they wisely and intelligently weaved their African culture into the American culture.

The best evidence of ritual paraphernalia comes from the Jordan plantation in Brazoria County, south of Houston, Texas. There, archaeologists Kenneth Brown uncovered an assemblage of artifacts from a cabin apparently used in healing and divination rituals . . . Brown believes that because of their forced abandonment of the site, the occupants hastily left behind objects not customarily found in the archaeological record. Excavations of the remains of several individual cabins revealed vestiges of specialized activities: the community evidently included a carpenter, seamstress, a cattle herder, or cowboy, and a shaman, or healer . . . The

assemblage of artifacts from the Jordan plantation presents an excellent example of how African Americans reworked mass-produced and other objects to achieve a special African American meaning (Singleton 148).

The Conjurer/Midwife's cabin was located in the northeast area of the slave and tenant quarters. The cabin was defined as such due to the discovery of the "Conjurer's Kit" located in the southeastern corner of the cabin. According to Dr. Brown, the contents of this kit included a variety of artifacts including five cast iron kettle bases, chalk, at least one sealed tube made of brass bullet casings, medicine bottles, and a thermometer. These materials were interpreted as representing the actual curing kit used by the BiKongo peoples of West Africa. Four other ritual deposits were found in this cabin which, including the conjurer's kit, creates a cosmogram. These discoveries prove that African beliefs and traditions were kept alive in secrecy throughout the middle passage and on through slavery in America. It is safe to conclude that the retention of the African culture in the guise of forced European concepts actually created a mental and spiritual safe haven for many African slaves.

## **IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES**

. . . beneath the skin, beyond the differing features and into the true heart of being, fundamentally, we are more alike, my friend, than we are unlike.

-Maya Angelou

It is time for a redefinition of White America. As our percentage of the population declines, our commitment to the future must change . . . The future calls each of us to become partners in the dance of diversity, a dance in which everyone shares the lead. And because we have been so separated by race and ethnicity for so long, we may feel awkward at first with the new moves . . . But with a little help from our friends in other cultures, even White folks can learn to dance again, as we once did among the great stone circles of ancient Europe. (Howard 10)

"Buried Voices and Distant Songs" will be implemented into the first semester of the theatre arts curriculum. The lessons will focus heavily on the TEKS objectives for Theatre Arts as well as the national standards objectives. Each lesson will have clearly defined academic topics that it supports, as well as subtopics. This is done to serve as evidence on how each lesson supports and develops other academic core subject areas. Before each lesson students will be asked probing questions such as: What is slavery? Why did slavery exist in America? Was America the only country that practiced slavery? Why was slavery such an integral part of the development of the United States? Did anyone in particular benefit from the practice of slavery? If so, who and in what ways or forms did they benefit? How would you feel if you were captured by a slave catcher? If you were captured, what methods would you use to escape or survive? How would you

feel if you were a slave catcher? What methods and/or tools might you employ to catch slaves?

I will give my students time to explore these questions over a period of two or three complete classes. Once these questions have been explored through honest opinion, discussion, and debate. I will further introduce the topic to be studied through slides, books, pictures, video, and film presentations. We will look at the economic, geographic, social, national and international ramifications of American slavery. We will also study the emotional and psychological states of the plantation owners, slave catchers, and slaves.

In an effort to have my students learn discipline, I begin each class with a 10- to 15-minute warm-up session. The warm-up begins with a theatre game to promote spontaneity, relaxation, and group work. I find this is a most effective way to have my students mentally release the stress that they customarily bring to all of their classes, enabling them to relate to my theatre arts class with a more open state of mind. The second part of the warm-up focuses on the relaxation of the body. My students enjoy performing yoga stretches and postures to various types of music. I like to use an array of different musical patterns and trends to keep the interest and curiosity of my students. The final phase of our daily warm-up consists of vocal exercises. At this time, students concentrate on breathing techniques, enunciation, and voice projection exercises.

After a brief orientation to the acting style and terminology being studied, students will begin dramatizing and exploring the given style through the realms and realities of various aspects of American slavery. The National Standards for Theatre Arts defines classroom dramatization as the act of creating character, dialogue, action, and environment for the purpose of exploration, experimentation, and study in a setting where there is no formal audience observation except for fellow students and teachers. For this study, excerpts from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Adventures of an African Slaver* by Malcolm Cowley will be read to the students. Afterwards, students will work in cooperative groups to explore and dramatize the various scenes and characters inspired from the readings.

Lessons such as the one briefly described above will be created for such acting styles as pantomime, scene study, monologues, and play production and performance. Students will keep a daily journal chronicling their personal opinions, ideas, and observations throughout the course of this curriculum. I will also incorporate technology into the lessons by videotaping their performances and discussions as both a motivational technique and performance assessment. This will serve as a guide for my assessment of their skills as well as a documentation of the entire project for future reflection.

## LESSON PLANS

### Lesson Plan One: What Does Your Bedroom Say About You?

#### *Topics*

Theatre arts, performance, science

#### *Sub Topics*

English, creative writing, social studies, history, mathematics

#### *Procedure*

Begin this lesson by asking students several probing questions such as, “What is an archeologist?” “What are the goals of an archeologist?” “Why is the study of archeology important to the survival of humankind?” “If an archeologist were to ‘excavate’ your bedroom, what conclusions would they come to about you and your family?” After an in-depth discussion of the science and art of archeology as an introduction to “Buried Voices and Distant Songs,” have each student take a picture of one wall of their bedroom or a part of their home that holds sentimental attachment to them. The photo must not have any obvious identifying marks/items in it such as the student’s name in large print across a wall or photographs of themselves or immediate family members that other classmates might know. Afterwards, randomly display each student’s photograph on the board. Now, the archeology/acting lesson begins!

1. Students are to randomly choose photographs not their own and preferably not a close friend of theirs. In order to achieve the level of anonymity necessary, the teacher should guide students through this portion of the exercise. With the “eyes and mind of an archeologist,” come up with as many facts about this character as you can. Create lists that separate your factual evidence from what you are assuming about the character.
2. Write a short, two-minute monologue from the character’s perspective addressed to someone close to this person. The relationship must be from a drawn conclusion from the photograph you “excavated.”
3. Perform monologues. Afterwards, have students justify their artistic choices from your chosen photograph.

### Lesson Plan Two: Who Am I?

#### *Topics*

Theatre arts, reading, history

#### *Sub-Topics*

English, social studies, acting, dance, movement

### ***Procedure***

The basis for this lesson lies in the effective presentation of varied literary text to students prior to the introduction of the theatrical activity to be studied. Excerpts from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Capt. Richard Drake's *Revelations Of A Slave Smuggler*, and William J. Grayson's *The Hireling And The Slave* are strongly urged. These works are chosen because they provide diverse perspectives and characters sufficient for educating and inspiring the imagination of students on the tremendous realm of realities during the era of American slavery.

Class discussion time should be scheduled after each text is read aloud to the class. This will give students the time necessary to understand and fully digest the information, characters, and their experiences in a more relaxed and nurtured environment. Students should not be expected to completely understand complexities such as character motivation, environment, and the social structure of slavery immediately at the beginning of this curriculum. Through the encouragement of consistent and persistent class discussion, the teacher will have the opportunity to reinforce the importance of studying the text through the historical nature of the times and not through modern thoughts and practices.

For actors to honestly perform characters, they must not judge them in any way. When actors judge their characters for "right versus wrong" or "good versus bad," they are creating a serious wedge between themselves and the truths of their character, preventing any honest portrayal from occurring. Instead, teachers should urge students to find something that they like or find common between themselves and the characters that they have difficulty performing because they do not agree with their character's personal choices. Doing so will challenge students to understand why it is not the goal of actors to change the past, people, or events—the goal of an actor is become an honest and clear mirror of the truth.

After the text has been discussed, introduce the theatrical art form of pantomime to your students. Pantomime is a style of acting, which focuses on the weight and height of objects and uses no sound or speech during the performance. Mimes focus on their physical body movements and gestures, facial expressions, and mental concentration in order to successfully entertain their audiences.

Students are required to rehearse and perform a pantomime routine inspired by the text studied. Each routine should have a minimum performance time of two minutes and should be in story form. With this, each performance should have a definite beginning, middle, and end that are easily recognizable to the audience. This lesson plan unit occurs in three phases and should be assessed as three separate performance grades. The performance time for this unit varies according to the class size and schedule of each individual teacher's classes.

1. Students are to pantomime a character sketch from either of the texts presented through individual performances. The performance must be in story form with a recognizable beginning, middle, and end. Students may use their own creativity to complete story lines, yet their choices must be consistent with the historical factor of the characters.
2. With a partner, pantomime a scene directly from, or inspired by, the text studied. This performance should again have a minimum performance time of two minutes and be in story form.
3. This phase of the lesson plan challenges students to perform out of their comfort zones. The teacher writes the names and descriptions of various characters and/or situations on small sheets of paper, folds each and places in a box. Students are to randomly draw from this box their next pantomime performance. Students perform what they pull from the box regardless of the sex, race or profession of a character. Doing so heightens the level of difficulty for the actor.

### **Lesson Plan Three: The Dance of Truth**

#### ***Topics***

Theatre, dance, music history

#### ***Sub-Topics***

Movement, physical education, history

#### ***Procedure***

I believe this lesson is a natural progression from the study of pantomime because it continues the actor's examination of their physical being into the art form of dance or interpretive movement. Teachers are to explain the term 'inner monologue' to students as a foundation for this lesson. Illustrate that all people experience inner monologues throughout the day, those private mental dialogues that are not shared verbally to others yet have such a profound affect on our choices and actions. You might want to ask students to explain the mental dialogue that occurred this morning when their alarm clocks went off or their parents came in to wake them up for school. Did they dialogue with themselves a debate on sleeping another 10 to 15 minutes? Or, did they discuss how much they how much they cannot wait to sleep in on Saturday?

For this lesson, the teacher will introduce various musical styles that were popular during the era of American Slavery—from the instrumental music to the rhythms of the slave spiritual. Students are required to do further library research on these music styles for the selection of their performance music. With this, teachers may schedule library time into their class schedule or assign this research for homework. I have found that scheduling the research time as a part of my class, I minimize excuses from students that they were unable to perform the research for whatever reason.

1. Have students sit comfortably with their eyes closed. Encourage them to allow their imaginations to “dance” along with the music. The teacher plays different musical styles allowing for the sharing of observations and questions after each selection is played.
2. Students are to choose a character and find a song from the era of American Slavery that best suits this character’s emotions. Next, students are to create a dance/movement performance for their character’s inner monologue. This performance should be a minimum of two minutes and no longer than four. Students are not to focus on choreography—as this is not a dance class. Students are to focus their creativity on the emotions, motivations, and desires of the character they are portraying. Imagine that their character is telling someone in particular personal thoughts or sharing these alone. The movement and music *is* their method of communication. Students may use one prop during this performance such as a chair, stick, or scarf.
3. As a part of the assessment of my student actors, I encourage all of my students to actively critique one another’s performances. First, they are given the same criteria that I will be grading them on. With this, the students are to use the given criteria as the basis for their comments to their fellow student actors. During criticism I always have my students adhere to the golden rule of my classroom. You must say something positive first. If you cannot find something positive to say—keep your opinions to yourself.

#### **Lesson Plan Four: I Can Write My Own History, Thank You**

##### ***Topics***

Theatre, playwriting, English, history

##### ***Sub-Topics***

Creative writing, acting, social studies

##### ***Procedure***

For this lesson, teachers are to show film excerpts of Alex Haley’s *Roots* and the Home Box Office Production of *The Slave Narratives*. After a class discussion on both films, the assignments begin.

1. Students are to write, rehearse, and perform a two-minute monologue of a character highlighted through our study of American Slavery.
2. Students are to be assigned in cooperative groups. Each group is to create a short script inspired from the monologues performed. Each script should have a minimum performance time of ten minutes (10 typed pages in length).

3. Students are to perform their original scripts as a final performance for this curriculum unit before an invited audience.

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